

Deseret Morning News, Wednesday, June 02, 2004

Conserve power, Utahns urged

By Dave Anderton
Deseret Morning News

Hotter summers, bigger houses and more central air conditioners are pushing Utah's electrical demand through the ceiling during summer months.

That has Utah Power asking its customers to curb electrical usage during peak demand days. On Tuesday, Gov. Olene Walker joined utility officials to urge people to conserve electricity this summer, part of the utility's PowerForward alert system, now in its fourth year.

Central air conditioning accounts for 30 percent of residential electricity usage among Utah Power customers. And because electricity is used as it is produced, the company's electrical infrastructure must be built to accommodate the few hours during summer months when electricity consumption reaches its peak.

If demand exceeds generation, brownouts or rolling blackouts result. The alert system works on a color-coded basis. Green power days indicate normal conditions.

Yellow power days call for extra conservation during the hours of noon to 8 p.m., as higher temperatures boost demand. On yellow power days, customers are advised to set thermostats to 78 degrees or higher, to cook food in microwave ovens or on outdoor grills instead of using electric ovens, and to run dishwashers and clothes washers and dryers after 8 p.m.

A red alert calls for customers to avoid using electricity. Since the program was implemented, there have been no red alerts issued.

In its first year, the alert system saved as much as 100 megawatts of electricity on yellow alert days, according to Karen Gilmore, Utah Power's vice president of customer services. Yet in recent years the savings have fallen. In 2002, yellow alert days averaged 90 megawatts of saved electricity. In 2003, the savings fell to about 75 megawatts.

A megawatt is enough electricity to power 500 to 750 homes.

While state officials and the utility are calling for more conservation, both camps stopped short of urging people to stick with evaporative coolers rather than central air conditioning.

Evaporative coolers — which cool air by drawing it through water-soaked pads and use about one-quarter of the electricity of central air conditioners — were found in more than 70 percent of Utah homes in 1994. In 2003, less than 50 percent of Utah homes used

evaporative coolers. And evaporative cooler use is projected to continue falling to about 20 percent of Utah's market by 2019.

The switch to central air conditioners is driving a massive capital campaign to build new power plants. Already, the \$350 million Currant Creek natural gas-fired plant is under construction near Mona, Juab County. In May, it was announced that a \$330 million natural gas-fired plant will be built at the former Geneva Steel site in Utah County.

The costs of those power plants have yet to be passed on to Utah Power customers.

In January, the Utah Public Service Commission approved a \$65 million annual rate increase for Utah Power customers. It took effect in April.

Under that increase, state regulators agreed to a three-tier pricing system from May through September. Residential customers will be charged 6.7 cents per kilowatt hour for their first 400 kwh of use, 7.6 cents for the next 600 kwh and 9 cents per kwh above 1,000. In winter months, residential customers will pay a flat rate of 6.7 cents per kwh.

The pricing system was implemented to ease electrical consumption during summer months.

The PowerForward effort joins another program to reduce electrical consumption. The utility's "Cool Keeper" campaign, introduced last year, attaches radio-controlled devices on central air conditioners, allowing the air conditioners to be shut off for short periods during high demand.

Despite conservation efforts, higher electrical usage and warmer summers are good for the bottom line. PacifiCorp's total residential revenues for the 12 months ended March 31 were \$994.5 million, an 8.7 percent increase over \$917.7 million in revenues the previous fiscal year.

E-mail: danderton@desnews.com

© 2004 Deseret News Publishing Company